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Viewing cable 06BEIRUT2351, MGLE01: INITIAL REACTION TO NASRALLAH'S SPEECH

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
06BEIRUT2351	2006-07-13 09:46	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Beirut

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 002351

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SUBJECT: MGLE01: INITIAL REACTION TO NASRALLAH'S SPEECH
JUSTIFYING HIZBALLAH'S ABDUCTION OF IDF SOLDIERS

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) Hassan Nasrallah's latest attempt to portray Hizballah as the "Great Arab Protector" has embarrassed and cornered much of Lebanon's political elite. Nasrallah used a widely watched news conference late on July 12 to defend Hizballah's unprovoked abduction of two IDF soldiers from Israeli territory to both threaten and shame Lebanon's political leadership. Druze leader Walid Jumblatt told the Embassy that Nasrallah's speech was well designed and effectively embarrassed the Siniora government. Jumblatt said it would be difficult to criticize Hizballah's successful operation in light of the events in Gaza. Maronite MP Robert Ghanem expressed concern that the Siniora government might not survive this challenge to its authority and competency. Fares Souaid, a former MP and veteran political observer, said that if Nasrallah gets away with his dangerous gambit, the Shia could well be perceived as the new "defender of the Arab cause," replacing the traditional bearers of this title, the Sunni regimes of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. End summary.

¶12. (C) Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's carefully structured rationalization of the unexpected and destabilizing operation of July 12 elicited immediate and concerned reaction from Lebanon's astute political leaders. The dramatic events along the Blue Line -- which are still playing out -- and Nasrallah's defiant challenge to the Siniora government -- will generate additional comment in the coming days.

¶13. (C) In a phone call to the Embassy late on July 12, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt conveyed both admiration and deep concern over the skill of Nasrallah and the ability of Hizballah to set everyone in the region back on their heels. Jumblatt flatly stated that the day's events were "supremely embarrassing" to the Siniora government, the March 14 pro-reform movement, as well as the Sunni regimes of the region. Commenting that Nasrallah's plan must have been under consideration for some time, Jumblatt said it cleverly strikes two deep chords in the Muslim community: Arab prisoners held in Israeli jails, and the escalating events in Gaza.

¶14. (C) Jumblatt suggested that Nasrallah had taken them all for a ride with his promise in the National Dialogue that now was the time for easing tensions in Lebanon. He was not impressed with Nasrallah's profession in his speech that "opportunities to take prisoners were never part of the bargain," but said the time to settle accounts has to be set aside for now. The Druze leader, a long-time observer of Nasrallah, believes that Nasrallah wants to keep his "winnings" and enter into protracted hostage negotiations, which will only enhance his standing in the Arab world.

¶15. (C) With regard to Siniora and the March 14 movement, Jumblatt feels it is facing its greatest challenge. Both the government and the pro-reform movement have been made to "look like fools" and are now trapped between an enraged Israel and a confident, aggressive Nasrallah.

¶16. (C) Lastly, Jumblatt said that to confront Hizballah at this time would likely lead to its (long-planned?) departure from the Siniora government -- and with its departure would go any chance to reach consensus on moving forward with the critically important UNIIIC process. Jumblatt implied that this may be the real prize after all.

¶17. (C) Influential parliamentarian Robert Ghanem likewise viewed the current situation as dire for the Siniora government. Ghanem said that Nasrallah had not only successfully kidnapped Israeli soldiers, but had also kidnapped the government's authority. As a Maronite leader in the March 14 alliance, Ghanem said he would strongly

advise caution to his colleagues and hope the situation would calm down -- even though he believed the chances for that were slight.

¶18. (C) Fares Souaid expressed frustration and anxiety over Nasrallah's "very smart message," which in his view had successfully wrested the banner of "Arab Protector" from its traditional standard bearers, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Souaid specifically noted that in his speech, Nasrallah had deftly embarrassed the principal Sunni regimes as incompetent with

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regard to Arab aspirations and ambitions.

¶19. (C) Souaid remarked that the Sunni community, both in Lebanon and other Arab countries, would now be in a highly defensive mood and the repercussions were unpredictable. Much would depend on how the situation evolved, but Souaid did not see how an outcome favorable to Lebanon's pro-reform forces was possible. He felt Israel would soon strike Lebanon (as it did that evening), and as a result, greatly increase the stature of the reactionary Hizballah.

COMMENT

¶110. (C) These admittedly few comments were obtained from a narrow spectrum (all were from the March 14 movement) and were made immediately following Nasrallah's news conference. The Blue Line events of July 12 are still being absorbed in Lebanon and reaction will adjust as the situation plays out, but the deeply pessimistic tone is notable and may be difficult to reverse. End comment.

FELTMAN